

THE VINES

AGORAPHOBIC, POSSIBLY SCHIZOPHRENIC, PRONE TO VIOLENT OUTBURSTS... THE VINES' CRAIG NICHOLLS HAS ALL THE MAKINGS OF A ROCK ICON. WITH AN EXCITING SECOND ALBUM UNDER HIS BELT AND IN A RARE MOMENT OF LUCIDITY, NICHOLLS TALKS GUITAR WORDS: ALAN DI PERNA

Vines leader Craig Nicholls acknowledges, "Yeah, we have a split personality." After one of his characteristically long pauses, the enigmatic frontman adds, "but hopefully it can all melt into one thing."

Nicholls' statement applies as much to The Vines' music as to his own precarious psychological make-up. Musically, The Vines juxtapose the raw aggression of 90s grunge with the sunny bliss of 60s guitar pop. It's a contrast they exploited to brilliant effect on their debut, *Highly Evolved*, and which they've honed to new heights of edgy perfection on their new album, *Winning Days*. The Vines main guitarist, not to mention lead singer and songwriter, Nicholls makes six strings slash like broken glass on the album's first single, *Ride*. His guitar roars bestial anger on the explosive album closer, *Fuck The World*. But he can also use the instrument to call down shimmery warbles from psychedelic heaven, inducing pure pop euphoria on spellbinders like *Rainfall*, *Sun Child* and the disc's title track.

"We've tried to make the album simple, but powerful," says the guitarist. "We didn't want it to be too chaotic. But there are still some tracks where there are a few overdubs."

As for the mercurial Mr Nicholls himself, well, they say you're never alone with a schizophrenic. Craig has a reputation for being difficult. There are tales of tantrums, trashed dressing rooms, drinks splashed in publicists' faces, bandmates boffed on the head... When he's not throwing a fit, some accounts allege, Craig lapses into a catatonic stupor, medicated by marijuana. But Nicholls also has a sweet side – boyish but thoughtful and lucid, although he's not a man to waste words. We're lucky to meet the nice Craig.

It probably helps to love rock and roll as much as he does – specifically, what many people these days refer to as 'the real rock and roll'. Nicholls and The Vines belong squarely in the tradition that starts with the Beatles, Stones, Who and Kinks and wends its way through the years, arriving, the last time



anyone checked, at present day garage and rock and roll resurgence bands. Asked to name his favourite current groups, Nicholls answers: "Black Rebel Motorcycle Club, Supergrass, White Stripes and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs."

Nicholls was pretty much born into this tradition. Back in the 60s, his dad led Australian garage rockers The Vines, from who Craig drew the name of his own group. Growing up near Sydney, Australia, young Craig delved head first into the parental record collection. But for all that, he's no 60s rock purist, in fact, his tastes are pretty basic.

"The Beach Boys, Beatles, Kinks and Jimi Hendrix are the only four groups from then I can name," he alleges. "Everything else I listen to is new. Mostly, though, I sit and listen to the Kinks. They're such great songwriters, so underrated, and they did so much great stuff later on. I'm obsessed with the Kinks. But also Stone Temple Pilots."

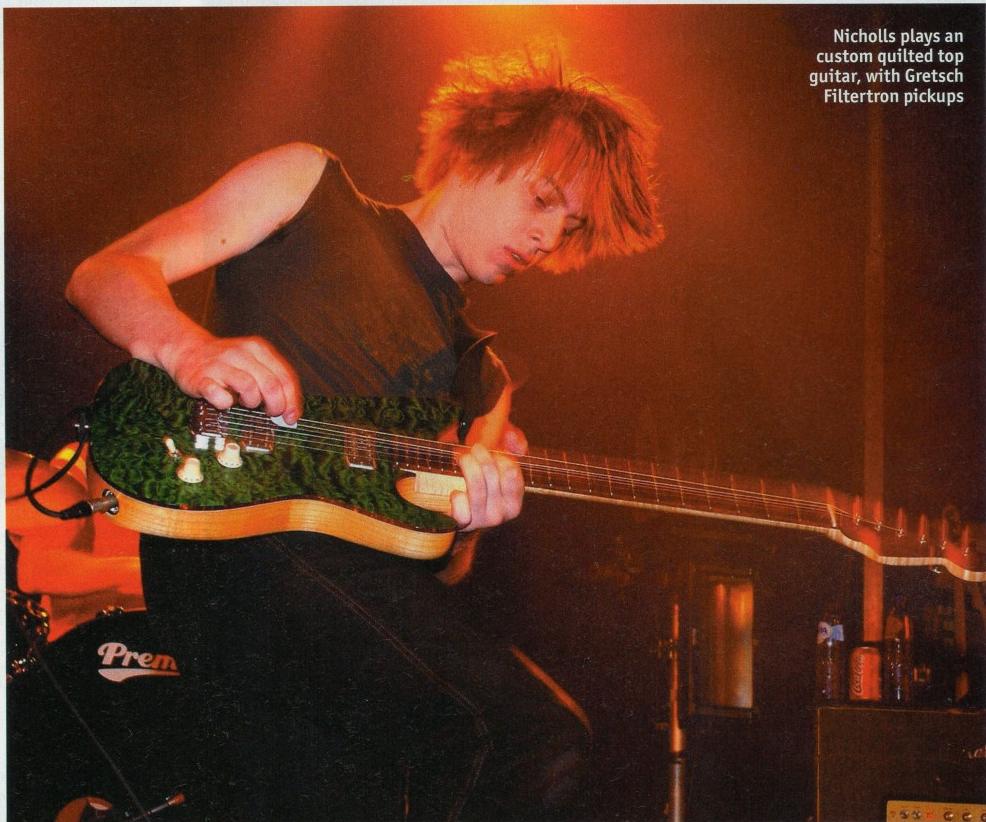
Growing up in Australia, Nicholls didn't experience the great divide that split American and British rock during the early 90s. As a result, Britpop stalwarts like Blur, Verve and Suede mean as much to him as Seattle grunge icons like Nirvana and STP. "Australia is very much influenced by America and England," he says, "which is good. We get to hear everything coming out."

All of which gives Nicholls a unique perspective as a songwriter. He's built his world around two of rock's most significant decades. Because it takes in a broad swath of time, Nicholl's musical vision has breadth of scope. But he's avoided geeky obscurantism, he writes populist stuff – easy to love.

There's a kind of purity in Nicholl's musical outlook. Maybe it's because he's such an insular person. Music is his whole universe. He doesn't go out of the house much. And being a man of simple tastes, Nicholls doesn't need to venture outside the domestic cocoon to indulge in all the things he's said to enjoy most – junk food, pot, video games and rock.

So imagine what it was like for the reclusive Nicholls to be discovered in 2001, and whisked to Hollywood to cut *Highly Evolved*. Formerly accustomed to recording at home on a four-track portable studio, Nicholls now found himself amid state-of-the-art luxury at the Sunset Sound Factory. And when he went out the studio door, he was smack in the middle of one of the world's most bizarrely artificial cities. So there was trouble. Tempers flared as sessions for *Highly Evolved* seemed to drag on interminably. Original drummer David Olliffe left, to be replaced by The Vines' current stickman, Hamish Rosser. The album was finally completed. It was well received on its release and would go on to sell 1.5 million copies.

But the aggravation was just beginning. Nicholls didn't really like touring and showed very little patience



Nicholls plays an custom quilted top guitar, with Gretsch Filtertron pickups

"I don't want to lose my hearing before I get a chance to follow through on all the ideas I have"

with music biz rituals like meet-and-greets, TV appearances and press interviews. The problem was mainly this: While his debut album had just been completed, he already had a whole slew of new songs in his head and wanted to go back into the studio. He seemed non-plussed that he couldn't. When we spoke to him in '02, he told us he was afraid he'd never get to commit all his ideas to disc.

"I don't want to lose my voice or hearing before I get a chance to follow through on all the ideas I have with this band. I have to start taking medication so I can stop worrying about it."

The touring finally ground to a halt during the summer of last year. The Vines travelled directly from London, site of the tour's final date, to the legendary Bearsville Studios in upstate New York. It was felt Bearsville's woodsy environs would have a calming effect on Craig – the opposite



of Hollywood. The rural resort gave the band an opportunity to decompress from touring while getting down to studio work – always the priority for Craig.

The *Winning Days* sessions reunited the band with producer Rob Schnapf (Beck, Foo Fighters) who had also helmed the recording of *Highly Evolved*. Part of Schnapf's production role with The Vines has been to act as 'older guy guitar guru'. "Rob owns a lot of cool guitars, which he brought into the studio," says Craig. "I think we had about 20 of them. A Tele was sort of my main guitar, but there was also a Strat, three different Guilds and a Gibson Les Paul. For amps, we had a Marshall and a Twin Reverb, but Rob also had a whole lot of really old-school amps, which were kind of small and weird sounding, but worked well on a few songs."

Compared with the drama and strife that attended sessions for the Vines' previous album, things went relatively smoothly in Bearsville. "There was definitely some tension there," says Craig. "If there wasn't, it wouldn't be very exciting. I think we were a little more experienced this time around, and so much more confident. I think that comes through in the overall sound of the album."

Indeed, *Winning Days* is a sure-footed, beautifully realised piece of work. While it contains some great singles, it's also an album in



Madder than Mad
Jack McMad...
or just a Kurt
wannabe?

HATSTAND!

CRAIG FROM The Vines IS WELL KNOWN FOR HIS LOONY ANTICS. BUT HOW DOES HE MEASURE UP AGAINST ROCK'S GREATEST NUTTERS?

OZZY OSBOURNE
MADDEST MOMENT:
Snorting a line of ants to impress a journalist.
LUNATIC RATING:
Fruitloop.

AXL ROSE
MADDEST MOMENT:
Inviting Izzy Stradlin round for a jam, then – upon his arrival – pulling a gun on him and telling to 'get off my fucking property'.
LUNATIC RATING:
Wibble.

ELVIS PRESLEY
MADDEST MOMENT:
Filling his swimming pool with lightbulbs and spending a whole afternoon shooting at them.
LUNATIC RATING:
Nutmace.

BRIAN WILSON
MADDEST MOMENT:
Forcing a studio string section to wear firemen's helmets during recording.
LUNATIC RATING:
Screwwball.

JIM MORRISON
MADDEST MOMENT:
Marrying a witch in New York City, drinking her blood.
LUNATIC RATING:
Mentalist.

Japanese girl group, Craig describes an anguish that "feels like Shonen Knife". "That just means it hurts," he says. "Very sharp and painful."

Having struck emotional rock bottom, the album then undergoes an abrupt mood swing. *Winning Days* is the sixth song on the album. Craig points out this would be the start of the second side of an old vinyl album, typically the place where 60s' artists would shift gears in some significant way. The tune is unabashedly euphoric. *Winning Days* evokes the rosy way the world looks through the eyes of childhood innocence.

"When I was singing it in the studio," says Craig, "I was so excited, and it just hit me: the album is going to be called *Winning Days*, I just thought that felt so positive. Even though the song says, 'The winning days are gone,' it doesn't matter, because the melody is happy."

Guitar pop splendour reigns supreme on the next four songs, and having lulled the listener, the album then ends with a big, rude bang. As its title might suggest, *Fuck the World* is the nastiest piece of work – all distorted bass, Gigantor riffs and throat-shredding rage.

"That song's just about the state the world's in," he says. "But maybe, on the other side, you also have the state of mind I was in at the time I wrote it. It just seemed like an obvious thing to say. I'm being kind of sarcastic when I say, 'Fuck the world.' But then maybe there's a side of me that does mean it."

Some garage rock purists dismiss The Vines. But this very fact gives them potential to reach a larger, more varied rock audience. Metal and emo kids can certainly relate to the belligerent angst of *Fuck the World*. "Hopefully we can turn people who like harder music on to other things," says Craig. "Like, 'Hey, acoustic guitars can sound alright too.'"

The video for *Ride* underscores this point. It opens with The Vines playing in an empty gymnasium. But when the chorus hits, the room is suddenly filled with rock bands. Almost every musical subculture is represented: punks, goths, geeks, riot grrls, jazzmen, funkateers and country pickers, all riding with Craig and the boys. With its gymnasium setting and youthful mob scene, the clip is also highly reminiscent of Nirvana's famous *Smells Like Teen Spirit* video.

It seems a deliberate riff on the whole 'Craig is the new Kurt' theme – something that's been around since the earliest days of The Vines. Like Cobain, Nicholls certainly seems a mass of raging psychological instability. Craig's taste in drugs, however, appears far less dangerous. And while many early observers labelled Nicholls the new rock and roll icon most likely to self destruct, The Vines leader is alive, kicking and itching to get back in the studio.

"I think it may be a concept album," he announces. "The Kinks did so much good stuff like that. That whole idea is really interesting to me. It seems like another step further. Something challenging, I guess."

the classic sense: a musical journey that takes the listener through variegated styles and moods. "It's a weird trip," says Craig, "which is good. I think it's unexpected. It takes you by surprise."

The band starts out in full-throttle grunge mode with the aforementioned *Ride*. The momentum continues with *Animal Machine*, but here Nicholls offsets Nirvana-esque verses with a reverb-drenched, lysergic guitar solo. And just to keep everyone guessing, Craig throws in some 'doo wop' choruses.

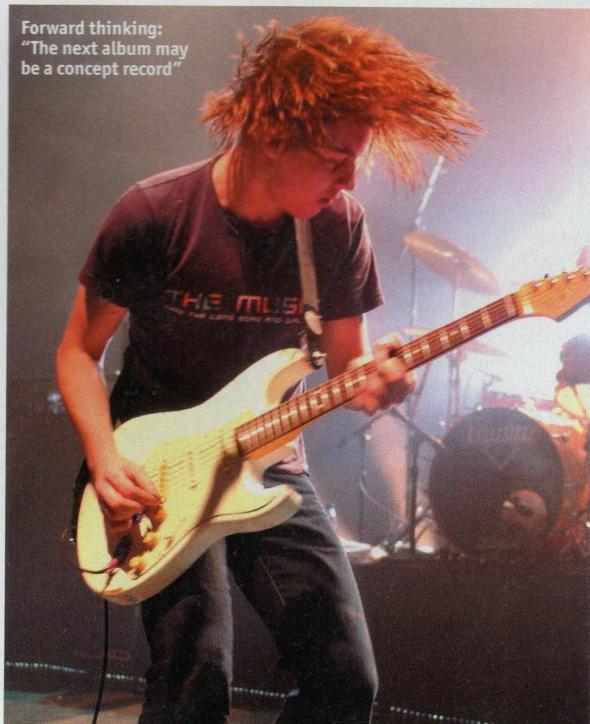
"It's like from the 50s," he laughs. "I love songs with weird vocal sounds, those old school, doo wop kind of words. On its own I think it would sound too sweet, but with the heavy guitars, it sounds kinda strange."

Nicholls' songwriting and arranging is all about contrasts. *TV Pro* derives its energy from jump-cut tempo changes. Floaty, psychedelic verses give way to driving, buzzsaw choruses. Craig notes the song is "meant to sound like a dream", causing one to speculate whether his dreams are as bipolar as his waking state seems to be.

The album hits its darkest moment five songs in, with the ominous, heavy, minor-key *Evil Town*. Punning on the name of Kurt Cobain's favourite

"The album's a weird trip, which is good. I think it's unexpected. It takes you by surprise"

Forward thinking:
"The next album may be a concept record"





GET FREE ■ LEARN TO PLAY

THE VINES: *Get Free* – Get Free – chorus

TRACK 21

0:27

T
A
B

Classic syncopation between the C5 and D5 chords makes the hook in this riff. The trickiest aspect here is keeping those chords clean and precise, especially at the tempo the track whistles along at.

BACKING – TRACK 22

THE VINES: *Get Free* – solo

TRACK 21

0:41

T
A
B

A simple but memorable melody makes up the guitar solo. The slide into the second note can start anywhere; it's the effect you're after. Slide from a place where you can stop easily on the note. Sliding from the previous note at the 5th fret is awkward because of the distance you have to cover, so instead try sliding from a couple of frets below the target note – easier now, eh?

BACKING – TRACK 22

THE VINES: *Get Free* – chorus 2 (last bar variation to chorus 1)

TRACK 21

1:09

T
A
B

This is the last bar of the second chorus (the rest is the same as the first chorus) and leads you into the bridge. In the bridge, Craig uses different chords to make it sound like a departure from the main song – a well-worn songwriters' trick.

BACKING – TRACK 22

THE VINES: *Get Free* – bridge

TRACK 21

1:23

T
A
B

A5

T
A
B

This is probably the trickiest section of the song. Craig is tracing out an arpeggio-based line on each of the chords in the bridge, rather than simply playing the chords. Ease off the picking hand attack a bit and maybe use a little palm muting to make the section work dynamically. This will heighten the dramatic effect when you pile back into the main sections.

BACKING – TRACK 22